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Column

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The Influence Of Energy Politics On Middle Eastern Relations

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Another apparently dominant phenomenon that continues to define the political processes and relations within and in the context of the Middle East is energy politics. It is home to vast reserves of oil and natural gas, and as such is one of the world's most important energy producers, and prone to becoming the focus of most major political and economic conflicts. As the global consumption of energy increases and as the world turns towards renewable energy sources the question of energy politics in the Middle East remains relevant in shaping the relations between the states, remanent in the source of the conflicts and a critical make-or-break factor in the energy security of the world.

The Historical Context: Oil as a Strategic Resource

Suffice it to say, tremendous oil fields in the Middle East in the early twentieth century turned it into a global energy provider. Its domination has been commonly associated with power in most instances. Realization of this led to the formation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960 with KSA in the driver's seat. Such a move originated from a cartel known as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries –OPEC- which held oil as a means of exercising control over the competitive global economy. OPEC in the early 1970s when it embarked on an oil diplomacy by declaring the

two oil shocks, was proof of cultural imperialism by energy-starved nations.

Oil as a source of energy has been the main determinant for the overseas affairs of Middle East countries. These countries' oil export resources have not only been allocated to internal improvements but also stand testaments to the political issues that these countries seek to assert their might and influence in the Middle East and perhaps on the international scene. But at the same time, the seniority of oil has turned the area into an arena for superpowers such as the United States, the Soviet Union during the Cold War, China, and Russia.

Energy and Power Politics and Stranglehold of Regional Rivalry

The Middle East has been the center of regional hostility due to its energy assets. For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran, the main oil-producing countries in the region, have been an unwilling partner and much of this conflict can be rooted in energy politics. Saudi Arabia being the largest member of OPEC has always assumed the role of protector of stable oil markets while Iran being an OPEC member has often taken opposed to Saudi Arabia, especially after the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

However, this rivalry is not only transparent in these two countries that are fighting for energy supremacy. Some of the small states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Kuwait also need to shape a relationship to energy resources but there is competition and cooperation typically. For example, although Qatar and Saudi Arabia possess a part of one of the largest single gas reserves in the world (the

South Pars/North Dome field) differences in some issues, for example, the division of this field's resources and the control of production rates have been identified. Such controversies have been realized impairing both the bi-lateral and intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) relations and external relations including those with the United States of America and other comparable states.

In the recent past, the role of natural gas has also altered the supply dynamics in the region's energy mix. In tight with the availability, Qatar is today the largest international exporter of the Liquefied Natural Gas/LNG. This new energy frontier unlike before has shifted diplomatic policies to regional dynamics, with countries such as Egypt, Israel, and Turkey seeking to secure sources of natural gas, this has put additional strain on already strained relations diplomatic relations.

The Function of Outside Forces in Energy Policy

Middle Eastern energy resources make them a focus of the attention of outside powers and the attention has played an enormous role in the relations of the region. For instance, the United States itself has maintained the region of the Middle East as important for its oil consumption. The US has sought to have its military forces remain in the region, especially in the Gulf to guard the sea route for oil from the Persian Gulf to the world market. , often referred to as the "oil protectionist" model, has been a major part of America's global policy during the 20th/21st century.

However, the overall picture of global energy is changing. Recent increased production of shale oil in the USA has prompted a change in the country's energy outlook, some experts say, claiming that the role of Middle Eastern oil could decrease. However, the U.S. remains a strategic partner with the important players in the region like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UAE among other things, and not merely for oil but actually for different reasons like security and counter-terrorism.

Like all members of the industrialized world, China too has been gradually drawn into the region due to its growing energy requirements. China has been developing

relationships with just about every Middle Eastern nation, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, given its position as the world's leading importer of oil. The case of the China-Iran relationship has also emerged more over the recent years, mainly because Iran's strategic partner, the U.S., places so much pressure on isolating Iran through sanctions. Multiplying the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China, the Middle East is to be connected to other ASIAN and African markets to consolidate China's geopolitical power besides providing a secure energy source.

Russia which is also an exceptionally endowed nation with natural resources, particularly oil has also tried to exercise power in the region as well. In Syria, support of Iran's nuclear project, and increased energy cooperation with states such as Turkey erode the traditional Western primacy in the region. Coercive power influence has always been an issue of contention with regard to Russia primarily due to continued Western powers' suspicion of Russian involvement in the region.

Energy Transition and the Future of Middle Eastern Relations

This paper sets out to establish how the Middle East is being shaped by the global transition to sustainable energy. The emerging market green economy where renewable sources like solar and wind dominate, and carbon neutrality where the world is headed might reduce the significance of oil and gas resources in the future. It has also caused conversations about diversification in the region with Saudi Arabia for example, which has begun an aggressive economic diversification drive under its Vision 2030 program.

But with the focus shifting away from the use of fossil fuels, there comes new problems in the region. The economics of the so-called 'rentier states' which have based their revenues and power on oil and gas now need to chart this transition without destabilizing themselves. At the same time, energy energy-supplying countries may use newly developed technology like hydrogen or better nuclear power to maintain their influence all over the world.

One of the major driving questions in this process is how regional rivalry works. While

the old oil-driven economies like Saudi Arabia may find this challenging, newly emerging ones like the UAE that have already invested in renewable energy may take a lead in the green revolution. The change that is occurring in the international energy systems may put even more pressure on the bipolar relations of energy dependents as well as the innovators. This evolution will likely change the nature of power alignment in the region as energy-dominated states shift towards a multipolar system.

Conclusion: Energy politics as a driving force

Energy politics constitutes itself an unyielding and potent factor underlying Middle Eastern interaction and influencing the region's politics for more than a century. Crude oil and natural gas have been used as tools of power and control and have regularly figured in conflicts

of power within regions and internationally. With the global energy transition toward the use of low carbon, the energy politics in the region is also set to transform. The ways and the extent to which Middle Eastern countries respond to these emergent shifts in the energy economy will define their political economy futures.

Energy will remain a significant factor in the context of the Middle East; nonetheless, the character and function of this component in the regional development process will significantly differ from those constituting the previous scenario. Thus, it can be stated that energy sources, regional and global rivalry competition, and other strategic stakes make the Middle East a region of significant interest over the coming years. How Middle Eastern nations manage these stakes may well define the trajectory for a new age of diplomacy and energy supply.